

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Sir Raymond E. Priestley

Scott Polar Research Institute
Cambridge, England
February 26, 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

As I trudged up the stairs of 'Corner House' in London one blustery morning a few months ago, my mind was whirling. What sort of man would I find? Although this was to be our first meeting, I had maintained a correspondence with this famous Antarctic explorer and educator for some time before coming to England - and now he was volunteering to help me locate some documentary material.

My curiosity was especially aroused by the recent news that Sir Raymond had been asked to accompany the U.S. Antarctic expedition for 1958-59 as the official British observer -- at the age of 72!

During our three-hour meeting, I was to find an incredibly alert and warm-hearted man - loved and admired by all who know him. Not content with merely making telephone calls, he bundled me into a cab, and set off personally to assist me in the search.

Later, as we lunched in his office, I listened to his invigorating anecdotal humor. With a refreshing clarity he relived exploits and adventures stretching back half a century.

Preface to Expeditions

Sir Raymond Edward Priestley, K.B.E, M.C., M.A., D.Sc., LL.D., D.Litt., now a most distinguished member of the scientific community, recalls that it all started one warm summer day in 1907, when he was finishing up his second year at University College, Bristol, where, as he puts it, he was "fed up to the teeth." Although Captain of Hockey, and a fair cricketer, Sir Raymond says "I was not so hot in school."

The Curator of the Bristol Museum, who had been asked to assist Shackleton in the selection of the scientific staff for his forthcoming British Antarctic Expedition, was interviewing a prospective candidate on that day. Priestley's elder brother, Bert (a Bristol lecturer in Botany), happened to be in the Curator's office. He turned to Bert, after the man had declined to accept the offer, and said "your brother is a geologist, do think he would be interested?" Bert replied "I'll ask him."

As Bert left the office, he ran across his younger brother in the library and promptly asked him "How would you like to go to the Antarctic?" Raymond looked up startled and said "I'd go anywhere to get out of this damned place." It was as simple and casual as that.

A few days later Shackleton wrote Priestley, who went at once to London for the interview. He says "the offer had been pure chance, but I was not missing any bets now".

Priestley left Shackleton's office without being sure whether he had been accepted or not. Ten days later he received a wire from Shackleton asking "why was I not in London collecting my equipment?" This was his first indication that he had made the grade.

Sir Raymond has always had a "sneaking desire" to know why he was chosen. He was not academically qualified and he discovered later that at least a dozen Honors graduates had been after the job.

In April 1908 in winter quarters in the Antarctic it came to light in a conversation with Adams, who had been present at Priestley's interview with Shackleton. Priestley's diary records the following conversation:

"You needn't think Priestley, that you were taken on this show because you were a great scientist." I. didn't. He went on "I was present when Shacks interviewed you at No. 9. He was worried at the time because he had got hold of real hard nuts." He had - Adams was one of them. "When you left the room," Adams continued, "he turned to me and said 'Well! Anyway I can manage that fellow!'"

Sir Raymond remembers that Adams' statement was probably true, but hastens to add "but, then, I could also manage Shackleton."



SIR RAYMOND PRIESTLEY

One can imagine young Priestley's state of mind during the hectic period spent prior to departure. He had never been further from home in his life than London. As Sir Raymond says "I was brought up in a non-conformist atmosphere: chapel twice on Sundays and the Wesley Guild in the middle of the week." Home was Tewkesbury, a "little out-of-the-world town" of 6000 souls, with father the headmaster of a Grammar School.

By 1907 Sir Raymond recalls "I had never smoked, was teetotal, had never sworn, and had practically never heard anyone I respected swear." My naivete was unbelievable." As an expedition member he experienced one farewell party after another, capped by a farewell lecture in his home town that ended in a shambles.

Although he had never lectured to an adult audience, the town flocked to the school to hear him. He showed a set of 48 lantern slides on prehistoric beasts and ran out of steam in 20 minutes. His next lecture was to occur five years later at the Royal Geographical Society in London with an audience of 2,000 - the "lecture of the year".

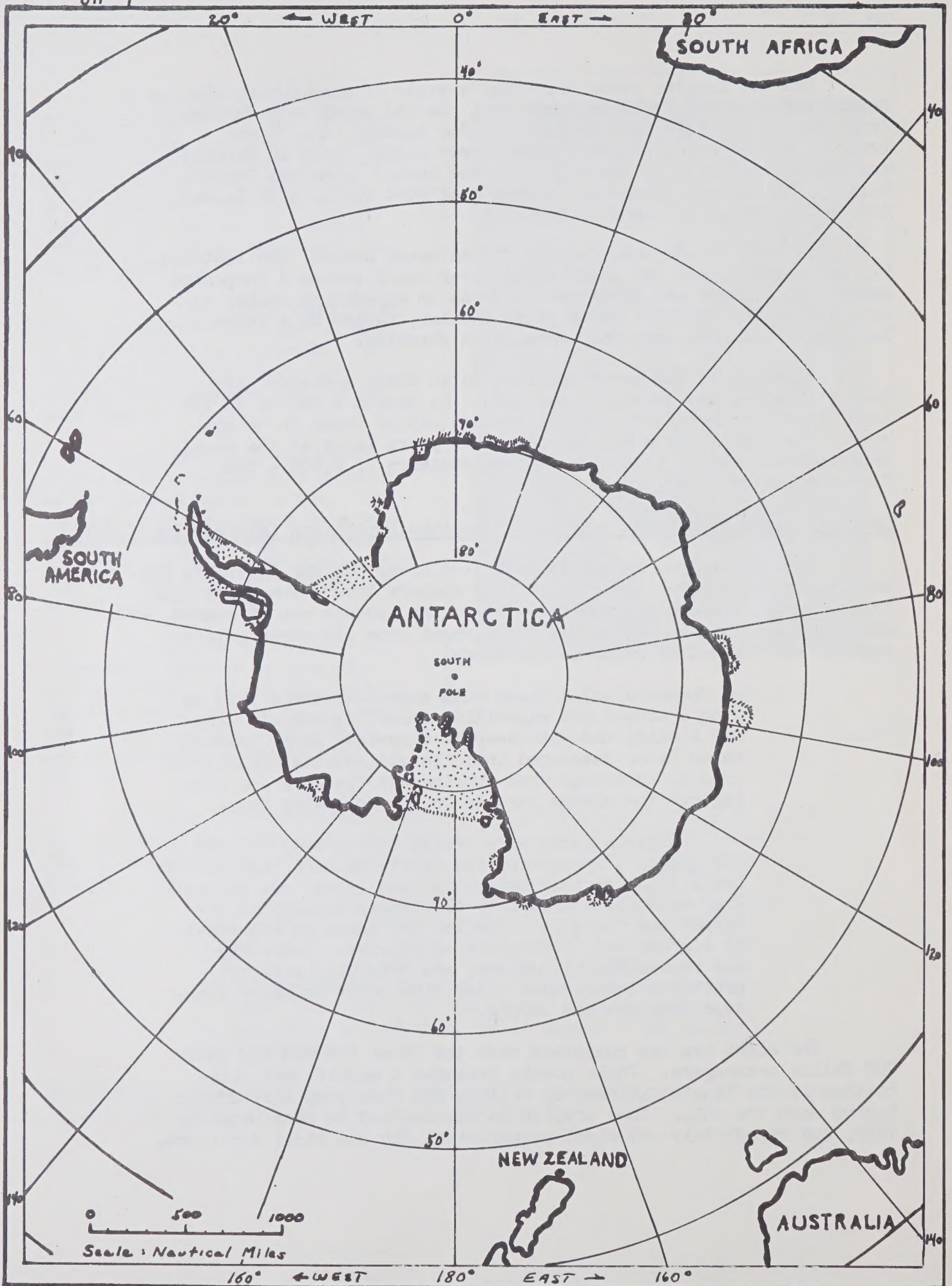
Geologist with Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition (Nimrod) 1907-1909:

In October 1907 Priestley left from Liverpool for Australia and New Zealand with seven other expedition members aboard the White Star liner, Runic, a one-class emigrant ship. The passage was 19 pounds, with all eight sleeping in one cabin. They spent some six weeks getting acquainted. Priestley wrote in his diary:

"We formed a solid block with esprit-de-corps laid on with a trowel and expedition-consciousness sticking out a mile, and with deepest cleavages among members which later developed into the cliques that Shackleton used to advantage when sharing out the work and picking out the sledge parties in the following year.

Cubicle mates were chosen before ever we left the Runic. Friendships and rivalries made then persist until today or they have only been ironed out by death. They were all overlaid by the larger loyalty to the leader and the expedition and the sense of comradeship in a great and distinctive enterprise. Shackleton men remain Shackleton men, and Antarctic explorers gravitate toward each other like corks on water whenever they get the chance."

The eight men ran roughshod over the Chief Steward and their 400 fellow passengers. Their pranks included a magnificent celebration of the King's birthday by setting off fireworks that almost burned down the ship. They arrived in New Zealand in late December 1907, and immediately set about preparations for the final departure.



The little (220 ton) Nimrod sailed from New Zealand on New Year's Day, 1908 with a crowd of 50,000 waving them off. The next few weeks turned out to be hell incarnate for the young would-be explorer.

The ship wallowed through rolls up to 45° day after day. Priestley was seasick constantly, but continued to stand watch (without oilskins) and carry out a four hour meteorological observation program daily. During this period he wrote in his diary the text of a letter that he sent later to his father: "The so-called 'scientists quarters' is a place that under any ordinary circumstances I wouldn't put 10 dogs in, much less 15 men of an expedition." He added that there were no portholes and that "the ventilation is prehistoric." He continues, "every blanket is wet through with salt water - the smell is almost insufferable." His

His description of his "watch" gives a stark picture of life aboard the tiny ship:

"It is in the night hours, however, that the watches are not only disagreeable, but dangerous. My night watches run from 8-12 the one night to from 4-8 the next, and it is not pleasant to be waked up at four in the morning by having a notebook shoved into your hand and being informed that it is your turn to take watch, that the barometer is going down and that a gale is blowing from the southwest, an entirely wrong direction for good progress.

Then you turn out and are immediately met by a wave in your face, another catches you as you are going up the ladder to read the thermometer on the poop and if you are at all lucky another lays hold of you and does its best to hurl you over the side while you are hauling up the canvas bucket of sea water to take its temperature. Then you go into the wardroom and sit down in your wet clothes until the next hour comes round."

When the Nimrod arrived at Ross Island in the Antarctic, Priestley was nearly sent packing back with the ship. For in unloading supplies he redislocated a knee from which he had summarily taken the plaster at Tewkesbury when sailing time came. Shackleton agreed to let him stay in the Antarctic only on condition he act as groom and nurse to the ponies, and on those terms he stayed. He was luckier than he knew, for a real geologist, Professor Edgeworth David, of Sydney, was a member of the party, and under him Priestley learned his trade.

Although the expedition remained in the Antarctic only 15 months, an incredible amount of work was achieved - at a cost of less than 50,000 pounds. During the single sledging season 1908-09, the available

men were divided into three units. The 'Southern Party' (Shackleton, three men and four ponies) succeeded in making the greatest leap toward the South Pole (within 97 geographical miles) that had yet been accomplished. This was some 360 miles closer than Shackleton and Scott had managed in the earlier Discovery expedition (1901-03). The journey included the pioneering of the longest valley glacier in the world and a traverse from sea level to over 10,000 feet. They returned exhausted to the expedition headquarters at Cape Royds, Ross Island in March. At one point they had travelled 48 hours without food before they picked up their lower depot on the Beardmore Glacier.

Professor David, at 50 years of age, successfully led three men through 1000 miles of footslogging and man-hauling sledges to the South Magnetic Pole. Priestley was a member of the third party, which conducted a geological survey in the area of the Farrar Glacier.

Before the expedition departed for New Zealand in the Antarctic autumn of 1909, Priestley had been adrift on an icefloe exposed to the attacks of killer whales for 24 hours, and had lain in a sleeping bag marooned on the live 13000 foot volcano, Mt. Erebus, without food for 76 hours.

Between Two Expeditions, 1909-1910

In March 1909 when the Nimrod steamed into Lyttleton harbor in New Zealand, Priestley wrote "I am one of a small company whose adventures are the most spectacular news of the day."

They were much acclaimed. At one New Zealand banquet Shackleton scribbled Priestley a note, "You will reply to the toast of science and the expedition. Just touch on the importance to the world of Antarctic meteorology, geology, magnetism, oceanography, botany etc. Have a word about the significance of the ascent of Mt. Erebus. On no account be more than five minutes."

The members of the expedition traveled in glory back to England on the Paparoa, first class, on "a voyage of pure joy". In second class was the girl who was later to become his wife. Priestley comments drily on the budding romance "We did not meet for some time, for Edwardian mothers were not too sure that polar explorers were safe for young girls to know."

On arrival in England Priestley writes, "Shackleton had already arrived and his fame was at its peak - sustained by a personality second to none in charm when he wished to please. He was cashing in on an astounding record of success and the personal friendship of King Edward helped a lot. We naturally shared his spoils."

Priestley lived with three of his expedition friends in a small room with two beds in London. "We did a small job of work by day..... at night we dressed for dinner and plunged abruptly into an entirely

different world. For, justified or not, we were the lions of the London season."

Reception at home was magnificent. "At Tewkesbury was a haven to which we could all retreat and find recreation and entertainment on a less bizarre scale and, even more important, we could rest. The five of us in our off moments and our leisure time ran the little country town. My Father and Mother, good Methodists though they were, were incredibly tolerant to my sailor and artist friends." They played cricket and hockey on the school grounds, challenging all comers, sang sailor songs on the steps of the Town Hall, bathed before breakfast in the Severn and boated on the Avon.

In October, Professor David persuaded Shackleton to send Priestley to Sydney to assist him in working up the Expedition's geological results. Priestley went off to Australia, and was soon registered as 'a Research Student ostensibly working for a B.A. research degree.'

He worked with David in Mackay Museum on tons of rock, which had been brought back from the Antarctic. They were on the first stages of a book that remains today a standard work on the subject. As the year went by they drew in Frank Debenham, who was later to be one of Priestley's greatest friends, both during the subsequent Scott expedition and at Cambridge.

Priestley fondly remembers his close association with David. With chuckles he tells of 'the great lecture' by David immediately after his return. "The Sydney Town Hall was filled with 6000 enthusiasts singing the ballad of the Professor's return. Mrs. David, late as usual, presented herself at the door and couldn't get in. She protested vigorously and long. At last the harassed doorkeeper gave way, 'Pass in woman, pass in' he said, 'you're the seventh Mrs. David I've let in this afternoon.'"

Besides preparing their document on the Expedition's geological results, Priestley and David had to help raise money for its publication. The two started a lecture tour in Australia. "David did the lecturing: my job was to sit between the Mayors' daughters and point out the things of interest on the screen. We had the time of our lives."

Geologist and Meteorologist with Scott's British Antarctic (Terra Nova)
Expedition 1910-13

Priestley received no degree. In December 1910 arrived the fateful telegram from Scott addressed to David. Could he persuade Priestley to go South again? It seemed that, just as Scott's party was about to set out, Allan Thomson was found to be suffering from tuberculosis. A replacement was needed immediately.

They wired Shackleton, who replied with no wasted words, "Certainly." Within a week Priestley was bound for New Zealand. He joined the Expedition aboard the Terra Nova and sailed again "for a second chapter of adventure, twice as long, twice as exciting and twice as profitable."

But, Priestley was to find that seasickness remained his chief foe. He says, "I think the only brave thing I ever did was to embark a second time for the Antarctic well aware of what I had to go through before even I set foot upon the shore."

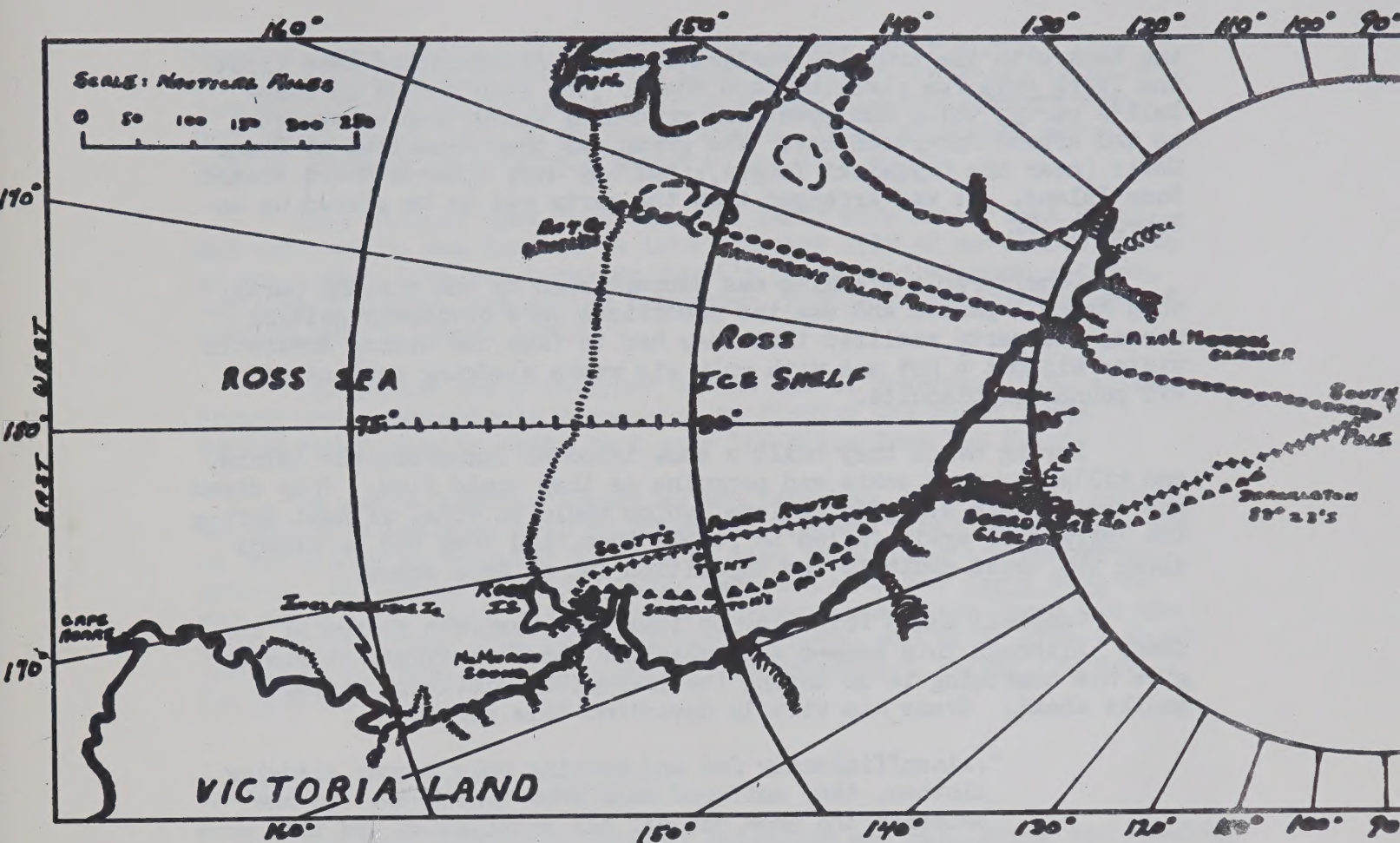
Ever since the Discovery Expedition some 10 years earlier, Scott had maintained the intention of returning to the Antarctic and completing his work.. Although he made no secret of the fact that the conquest of the South Pole was to be his main object, he intended to make his expedition as efficient and useful as possible for scientific purposes. Thus it was decided that two separate bases were to be built and maintained; one for the Northern Party in Edward VII Peninsula, and another on Ross Island for the Southern Depot Party, which was to be led by Scott.

During January 1911 the main hut was erected at Cape Evans, and, finally on the 26th Priestley and the others of the Northern Party left with the Terra Nova in search for a base site. They were never again to see Scott.

While the Scott party was busily laying depots for the attempt on the Pole the following Antarctic summer, the Terra Nova sailed east along the Ross Ice Shelf. They were unable to find a suitable offloading point near Edward VII Peninsula, and turned round and steamed back along the barrier edge, keeping a close watch for an accessible location.

On February 3 they turned into the Bay of Whales and "to our astonishment saw another ship in the Bay..... at that time no member of the ship's company had any idea that we had any rivals in this portion of the Antarctic, though most of us knew that Amundsen intended to try for the Pole."





It was indeed the Fram, Amundsen's ship. The British party soon met Amundsen and his men who had already set up winter quarters. The meeting left the Terra Nova group "with much to think of." They were especially impressed with the quality and number of dogs, which the Norwegians seemed to have under perfect control.

They altered their plans and returned at once to Cape Evans to inform Scott and the Southern Party of Amundsen's arrival. This done, and not wishing to intrude on the territory of another explorer, Campbell (the leader of the Northern Party) and his group decided to sail north to Cape Adare, where they landed and built a hut near that of Borchgrevink, who had been the first to winter on the Antarctic continent, in 1899. Because of the nature of the country they were unable to travel inland. Thus the party passed an uneventful but useful winter during 1911 taking meteorological, auroral and other scientific observations.

On November 2, 1911 Scott and his group left Hut Point (Ross Island) for the fateful march to the Pole, which was reached on January 17, 1912 a few days after Amundsen's arrival. As they were turn-

ing back with the crushing realization that Amundsen had been first, the Terra Nova was reaching Cape Adare. The ship picked up Campbell's party, which had spent the preceding summer months sledging in and around Robertson Bay. The group was then deposited at Evans' Coves (near the Drygalski Tongue), halfway down McMurdo Sound toward Ross Island. It was arranged that the party was to be picked up on February 18.

Considerable sledging was accomplished by the six-man party. When March 1 passed and sea ice conditions were obviously getting worse, the party realized that they had to face the coming Antarctic winter without a hut and with only six weeks sledging rations and 270 pounds of biscuits.

During March they built a snow igloo on Inexpressible Island, and killed as many seals and penguins as they could find. They dared not touch their sledging rations, which would be vital if next Spring the Terra Nova again failed to rescue them, and they had to sledge along the coast south to the Expedition hut at Cape Evans.

Campbell asked Priestley to take over complete charge of the food. Although this seemed a troublesome chore at first, it was to give him something to do during the incredibly difficult winter months ahead. Evans has vividly described this period:

"..insufficiently fed and wearing only summer sledging clothes, they suffered much from frostbite. On one occasion the snow cut off all ventilation and they were almost poisoned by carbon monoxide fumes. They could not stand upright in their snow cave and were plagued by 'igloo back'. Toward the end of the winter they got enteritis. Raging diarrhea made their combined shelter filthy beyond words; I visited it afterwards and was horrified at what I saw."

A June entry by Priestley in his diary states, "two of us spent the day toiling over blubber fire and meat-board, while the other four lay supine in their bags. Our morning meal and evening meal alike (lunch had been cut out months earlier) were hooshes at which any English tramp would have turned up his nose."

Meanwhile, at Cape Evans, the base party realized that Scott and his party must have perished when they failed to return by April. Unknown to them, this had indeed happened, and Scott's last entry in his diary had been made on March 29, 1912 at a point only 11 miles from a cache they were unable to reach. A blizzard had held them inside their tent for eight days as their food and strength dwindled to nothing. The remainder of the party at Cape Evans spent a second winter as nothing could be done until the following summer.

On September 30, 1912, the Campbell party left their snow cave and set out painfully for Cape Evans, 210 miles to the south. Man-hauling the sledges they reached Hut Point some five weeks later and

found a letter telling them of the fate of the polar party. They went on to Cape Evans, where they were received with great astonishment. Priestley remembers that they were indescribably filthy, not having had a bath in almost 10 months. Thus an almost unbelievable chapter of Antarctic history came to a close.

They learned that Scott and his party were dead, that Evans had returned to New Zealand in late February 1912 after almost dying on the return from accompanying Scott's party on the polar plateau, and that Atkinson, the acting commander, had left towards the end of October with a search party.

The search party returned at the end of November 1912, after having been unexpectedly successful in finding the Scott party buried under snow in their tent some 160 miles from Hut Point.

In early December Priestley and Debenham, with a small party, set out on a two-week trip to climb Mt. Erebus. They reached the top of the crater on December 12 just in time to witness a gigantic eruption. On January 18, 1913 Evans returned with the Terra Nova on her third Antarctic visit ready to celebrate what they hoped was the great event. They soon received the bad news, and after a very short period of packing, the remainder of the expedition sailed for New Zealand and home.

Service in World War I 1914-1919

The post-expedition work of collating and publishing the results, which began in Cambridge in 1913, was interrupted by the war, and the expedition members were soon widely scattered. Priestley saw some six years in uniform. Three of these dragged along for him while he served as Adjutant of the Army's radio training center in Worcester - while his two younger brothers were killed in France.

"If he had not rebelled", a journalist writes, "he might have stayed there to the end." He had his way and went to France as a Captain in the Signal Company of the 96th Division, which was to break through the Hindenberg Line at its strongest point.

He was decorated with the Military Cross and ended the war as Assistant Chief Signal Officer of the First Army. He was held for an additional two years, first to write the history of the British Signal Division in France and then to prepare the history of the 46th Division. "Those jobs", he confesses, "I tried to dodge."

Academician 1919 - 1952

A less orthodox academic career would be hard to find. His chosen line of work when he left school at Tewkesbury and went to Bristol University was botany. There, he switched to geology, which he later practised so well in the Antarctic under the watchful eye of Professor David.

After his lengthy war service, he was well over 30 when at last he arrived in Cambridge, this time on an agricultural scholarship after an examination in which he gained distinction in botany! Having entered in that field, he took his degree in another - that of glaciology, by interpreting and presenting glaciological information derived from the Terra Nova Expedition. His B.A., awarded in 1921 (16 years after he started at Bristol University), was one of the last awarded for research.

During these early years at Cambridge Priestley was to see the realization of a hope that had been carefully nourished for eight years - the establishment of a polar institute in England. It was in November 1912, after the return from the winter spent in the "ice cave" on Inexpressible Island, that Debenham and Priestley first discussed what they felt was a pressing need for a central repository for polar field records.

The following month, while sitting out a blizzard in Shackleton's old hut, the two continued their discussions, and "Deb" put down their thoughts on foolscap for the establishment of a "polar institute." The discussions continued on their return to England and on the arrival of the Expedition's scientists in Cambridge.

After the war, when a somewhat diminished group returned to Cambridge, Debenham, with Priestley acting as "co-petitioner" was finally able, in 1919, to have a letter forwarded with the proper endorsements to the Trustees of the Scott Memorial Fund. This turned out to be the key step in the official formation the following year of the "Scott Polar Research Institute", with Debenham as its first Director. Priestley has always maintained a close relationship to the Institute, serving on its Committee of Management almost continuously, as well as constantly being available for help and advice.

Priestley's B.A. was followed by his appointment at Cambridge as Demonstrator in agricultural chemistry, by his fellowship at Clare College (Cambridge) and by his post in research studies looking after research students. He took so personal an interest in his group of researchers, that he has continued to run into them all over the world - and is still remembered fondly.

By 1926, at the age of 40, he had become Secretary of the newly-formed Board of Faculties, which was made virtually responsible for education policy at Cambridge. At this point his life took another twist as he turned completely from teaching towards University administration, a task which occupied him until his "retirement" 26 years later.

In 1934 he received the invitation to become the first paid Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University (in British and Commonwealth universities this is the key administration post, the Chancellorship remaining largely an honorary function). When he stalked out of that

post in 1938 in protest against the educational parsimony of the State Government there was an invitation waiting for him to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, a post which he held until he retired at 66 in 1952.

While at Birmingham, chance drew him into a wider field of education - he became a member of the Asquith Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies. For 12 years he was engaged in the work of the Commission, and played a prominent part in fostering the development of higher education in the colonies, particularly in Malaya and the West Indies; the latter he visited 14 times.

"So in 1952 might have ended the industry and exploits varied beyond belief and successful beyond most men's hopes, of one who had never plotted to gain his ends or even mapped out a firm course." Instead, in 1953, he accepted the appointment by the Government as Chairman of the Royal Commission on Civil Service Pay - "a daunting experience" he remembers with a wry grin not wholly untinged with pride.

Acting Director Falkland Islands Dependencies Scientific Bureau 1955 - 58

Soon after his Civil Service work ended, he was called out of his retirement down among his native Cotswolds, to "hold the fort" for the permanent Director, Dr. Vivian Fuchs, who was soon to gain worldwide attention with his eminently successful Trans-Antarctic Expedition.

Appointed by the Colonial Secretary, Priestley was soon exceedingly busy at the FIDS office in Westminster, London. The main function of FIDS is the collation, analysis and publication of scientific results obtained by FIDS scientists and observers at some dozen bases which FIDS maintains in the south polar regions. Priestley's appointment came at a time when considerable activity was being planned by FIDS as a part of British Antarctic participation in the International Geophysical Year: additional land bases, a replacement for the John Biscoe and the purchase of a second support vessel.

In January 1957 Priestley was asked to join the Duke of Edinburgh during his sea voyage and visit to the Falkland Islands Dependencies and to Gough Island. Priestley vastly enjoyed this trip and has many fond recollections of Prince Philip.

Just as Sir Raymond's duty at FIDS was ending, along came the invitation to join the U.S. expedition to the Ross Sea area. This was too much to miss, and he set about preparing, with brisk enthusiasm, for his first visit to his old stamping grounds in almost a half-century. His thoughts must have gone back to the tiny Nimrod as he boarded the 13,900 ton Wyandot at Lyttleton, New Zealand last November for the trip to the polar ice.

With some anticipation he was looking forward to spending his 72nd birthday in the Antarctic. "They know my age" he said modestly before he went. The London Times added, "No doubt they also know his spirit....his genius for getting on with people and especially his love of work in polar regions."

Yours sincerely,

John Hanessian, Jr.
John Hanessian, Jr.

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